

THE RHETORICAL POWER OF HEURISTIC QUOTATIONS: INCORPORATING THE WEN FU INTO THE WRITING CENTER

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For many years I have promoted a simple but useful routine in our writing center, typically practiced by my staff of student writing consultants on a weekly basis: the act of locating and displaying sage quotations on some aspect of writing, expressed by important thinkers—including philosophers, scientists, teachers, politicians, entrepreneurs, and artists, among others. Such quotations serve a different purpose than merely inspirational quotations, which appear on all sorts of things these days, and in many surprising places, from a coffee cup¹ to the webpage of UCLA's Office of Instructional Development². Using "heuristic quotations" (or "HQs"—as we call them) involves discovering substantive statements that capture the thoughts or sentiments of published writers from diverse backgrounds, with varied interests, each addressing an important facet of writing. The heuristic quotations we feature are typically written by hand, in bright colors, on a marker board that prominently hangs just inside the door of our facility. An almost effortless instructional method, the posting of heuristic quotations reinforces our collaborative approach to peer consulting in subtle but useful ways, providing visual prompts that can orient writers and consultants toward thinking about, and working on, common goals. Practically speaking, heuristic quotations operate as a kind of rhetoric, illustrating one beneficial way in which, as Melissa Ianetta argues, "the rhetorical tradition and contemporary writing center studies can illuminate one another" (39).

To better appreciate the benefits of heuristic quotations, in particular, a brief consideration of the purpose of a heuristic, in general, will provide some helpful clarity. Simply put, a heuristic is a rhetorical tool to facilitate new insights, problem solving, and applied learning. In other words, it promotes the activity of discovering fresh ideas (Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 454). Emanating from the formal study of rhetoric, especially in relation to the first of its five major categories—the canon of invention—a heuristic presents the means to generate original thinking about a subject for a speaker or writer. "The canon of invention can be understood as a kind of techné," explains Michael Kleine, "especially when it serves an enabling function as new discourse and knowledge are produced"; furthermore, "it is invention as a heuristic strategy ... that has been the focus of many

contemporary compositionists" (211). As Christopher Eisenhart and Barbara Johnstone expound in *Rhetoric in Detail: Discourse Analyses of Rhetorical Talk and Text*, "A *heuristic* is a set of discovery procedures for systematic application or a set of topics for systematic consideration. Unlike the procedures in a set of instructions, the procedures of a heuristic do not need to be followed in any particular order, and there is no fixed way of following them" (11). This trait, the heuristic's fluidity, yields unexpected prospects, options, and choices, making it ideal for the unpredictable collaborative activities that characterize writing center practice. Providing a means for reflective consideration of options for the writer, as guided by the consultant, a heuristic generates ideas for taking the next step in the collaborative process. Eisenhart and Johnstone continue, "A heuristic is not a mechanical set of steps, and there is no guarantee that using it will result in a single definitive explanation. A good heuristic draws on multiple theories rather than just one" (11). Therefore, the use of a heuristic in the writing center is both generative and elucidatory, serving to encourage alternative ways of thinking and writing from among the many possibilities available to the writer and the consultant. Operating much like what Isabelle Thompson labels as "cognitive scaffolding" in the writing center, a heuristic, correspondingly, provides a promising matrix that "aims at supporting students while they figure out answers for themselves" (423).

Generally, heuristic quotations produce an indirect persuasive influence upon writing center visitors, setting a contextual frame of mind and having the potential to raise significant rhetorical questions within student writers. The following are some sample heuristic quotations on writing that we have posted in our center previously, each provoking a fresh awareness of writing issues and options, addressing our clients as the primary audience.

Regarding the value of cultivating a disposition of keen observation, especially by writers in relation to the natural world, marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson offers some sound advice: "The discipline of the writer is to learn to be still and listen to what his subject has to tell him" (qtd. in Brooks 2). How, then, might I, as a student writer, endeavor to *listen* to the *subject* of a paper more intentionally, and

what might the subject be trying to *tell*, if only I were to adopt the skill of being *still*, reflectively attentive in a posture of self *discipline*?

As to the importance of choosing the best diction to express an intended meaning, this famous quotation from author and humorist Mark Twain addresses the issue nicely: “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug” (qtd. in Ayres 252). Since a *right word* has the potential to capture the complexity of reality, how could I, as a student writer, come to value and employ the precise meanings to be had in an increasing repertoire of words that offer options of real *difference*?

Or consider this provocative and memorable definition of “research,” as crafted by anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neal Hurston: “Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose” (143). Given the intensifying importance of credible investigation and the proper use of secondary sources, how should I, as a student writer, best understand the origins of satisfying *research*, especially the kind that encourages *poking and prying* of the sort that will sustain genuine *curiosity* throughout the many tedious methods involved?

Heuristic quotations such as these can work to rouse and invigorate a writer’s deliberative disposition, leading to genuinely invested thoughts and actions. Imparting aphoristic wisdom, these linguistic touchstones invite collaborative conversation, conducting deliberate writing practices within the context of the consulting session and beyond.

This semester our writing center began incorporating weekly heuristic quotations from a single, non-western source. The innovation occurred to me during winter break, when I had the occasion to read Sam Hamill’s stunning translation of the *Wen Fu*, “the first major discourse on the art of writing in ancient Chinese” (xv). Given to me by a good friend who grew up in Asia, this collection of “prose poems,” composed in the third century by the soldier-poet Lu Chi, offers remarkably practical advice for those who conscientiously strive to put their thoughts and feelings into words. Building upon the tradition of the *Ta Hsueh* (*Great Learning*) of K’ung-fu Tzu (Confucius), the *Wen Fu* can best be understood according to its English title—“the art of writing.” The translator explains that “In its most generic interpretation, *wen* means simply a pattern wherein meaning and form become inseparably united, so that they become one, indistinguishable” (xxv).

Incorporating select heuristic quotations from the *Wen Fu* into the writing center addresses two concerns

recently examined by columnists in this journal: Jessica Chainer Nowacki’s encouragement to consider innovative ways to conduct ongoing ESL training, especially in relation to Chinese students; and Kathleen Vacek’s call to include the reading and discussion of poetry in staff development, particularly as a means of enriching understanding about multiliteracies. Our institution, a “small Midwestern liberal arts college” like Nowacki’s (1), has experienced steady growth in its ESL services at the writing center, so much so that it now represents twenty-five percent of our annual total, with Chinese students factoring in significantly. And without the resources to support ongoing writing center staff training courses, our writing center welcomes the sort of solution that Vacek recommends, along with its benefits: “Reading poetry about language and literacy ... can stimulate a greater awareness of the issues writers face as they communicate across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts” (2).

Inspired by these concerns, I have designed an ESL-focused poetry experiment using the *Wen Fu* that plays out in the following manner. First, after providing each of the seventeen poems, in chronological order, one per week, I have asked staff members to carefully read each one with an imaginative consideration of how the text might apply to our clients, most notably ESL students. Second, from each weekly poem I have extracted a heuristic quotation, ultimately to be posted for our clients to see when they visit the center; each quotation can potentially foster an important concept about writing. Third, consultants have been encouraged to reference the heuristic quotations during their collaborative sessions with student writers, as natural opportunities arise to discuss them. Fourth, staff members will dialogically process the perceived impact of the poems on themselves, and the heuristic quotations on their clients, through the “consultant conversation” listserv each week. And fifth, staff members will be asked to respond to a survey at the end of the semester, providing further feedback for analysis. This experiment is in some ways similar to Nowacki’s use of weekly online discussion board posts in response to Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth’s essays in *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, and through it I hope to persuade my consultants to “go from isolated islands to a cohesive, excited, and engaged team interested in helping each other better assist the students that visit the center” (3). Likewise, along with Vacek, I trust that my consulting staff—largely consisting of native English speakers “who do not have first-hand experience with linguistic disadvantage”

(2)—will become more sensitized to ESL student writers because of reading and discussing poetry on the subject of writing, brilliantly expressed in Lu Chi's *Wen Fu*.

The following heuristic quotations have been taken from the *Wen Fu*, each with its corresponding poem title, for your consideration. The insights about writing that the respective poems communicate are still relevant today. How might these heuristic quotations enhance the collaborative work that you do in your writing center?

Preface

"Only through writing and then revising
and revising
may one gain the necessary insight."

I. The Early Motion

"Studying the four seasons as they pass,
we sigh;
seeing the inter-connectedness of things,
we learn
the innumerable ways of the world."

II. Beginning

"It is like being adrift
in a heavenly lake
or diving to the depths of the seas.
We bring up living words
like fishes hooked in their gills,
leaping from the deep."

III. Choosing Words

"Writing, the traveling
is sometimes level and easy,
sometimes rocky and steep."

IV. The Satisfaction

"The pleasure a writer knows
is the pleasure of sages.
Out of non-being, being is born;
out of silence,
a writer produces a song."

V. Catalog of Genres

"Great writing fills a reader's eyes
with splendor
and clarifies values."

VI. On Harmony

"Ideas seek harmonious existence,

one among others, through language
that is both beautiful and true."

VII. On Revision

"Only when revisions are precise
may the building stand
square and plumb."

VIII. The Key

"While the language may be lovely
and the reasoning just,
the ideas themselves
may prove trivial."

IX. On Originality

"The composition must move
the heart like music
from an instrument with many strings."

X. Shadow and Echo and Jade

"When the vein of jade
is revealed in the rock,
the whole mountain glistens."

XI. Five Criteria

"False feelings are
a slap
in the face of grace.
Even disciplined feeling
leads nowhere
unless there is also refinement."

XII. Finding Form

"Know when the work
should be full,
and when it should be
compacted.
Know when to lift your eyes
and when to scrutinize."

XIII. The Masterpiece

"I take the rules of grammar
and guides to good language
and clutch them
to-heart-and-mind."

XIV. The Terror

"Work with what is given;
that which passes
cannot be detained.
Things move into shadows

and vanish;
memory returns in an echo.”

XV. The Inspiration

“The writer feels dead
as bleached wood,
dry as a riverbed in drought.

For a way out, search
the depths of the soul
for a spirit.”

XVI. Conclusion

“Through letters, there is no road
too difficult to travel,
no idea too confusing
to be ordered.”

Notes

1. The original link can be found at:
<http://www.cafepress.com/+inspirational+mugs>
2. The original link can be found at:
<http://www.oid.ucla.edu/units/tatp/old/lounge/pedagogogy/quotes>

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